

Black bear is back home; the fate of her cubs is unknown

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The Louisiana black bear that was sedated and captured after being found in a cottonwood tree in a Bossier City neighborhood is back home at Tensas National Wildlife Refuge.

"Her bearings were a little off, she was a little west" of where she was headed, said biologist Maria Davidson, a Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries supervisor over nongame species. The 200-pound bear, known as D-16, traveled about 160 miles between March 22 and Tuesday.

"But she got a ride home Tuesday night. She was allowed to wake up in her culvert trap Tuesday night and was released Wednesday morning."

Identified by a collar and an embedded microchip, D-16 is part of the Louisiana Black Bear Conservation Committee's repatriation project. The program moves bears to new habitats to build the species' population.

D-16's adventure began March 16, when she and her two cubs were moved from their home on private land just north of Tensas National Wildlife Refuge to Three Rivers Wildlife Management Area in southern Concordia Parish, about 50 miles south of Vidalia.

Signals from D-16's electronic collar are monitored daily by Black Bear Conservation Committee and Wildlife and Fisheries biologists. The signals were consistent for about a week.

March 23, there was no signal from the bear's electronic collar. And an extensive search by land and air turned up no sign of D-16 and her cubs.

There was no sign of the 12-year-old bear until she was spotted in a cottonwood tree in Lois Hogan's backyard in Bossier City on Tuesday.

Guarded by Hogan's curious dog, the bear was likely cornered for hours in the residential area bordering the east bank of the Red River.

Hogan reported the unlikely visitor around 5:30 p.m. and Bossier City police and wildlife agents performed crowd patrol before a biologist from Monroe arrived to tranquilize the 200-pound bear at 9 p.m.

After hearing D-16 was in a neighborhood, biologists were a little concerned how law enforcement officials and the public might react in light of the death of a 6-year-old Ohio girl who was killed by a black bear while hiking with her family in Tennessee on Saturday.

The tragedy was rare and uncharacteristic of the thousands of bear and human encounters each year, Davidson said.

"What you generally see is the behavior of D-16. She was staying to herself, and if someone hadn't spotted her, she would have climbed down and kept on going," she said.



Maria Davidson, a bear biologist with the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Department, holds D-16's cubs March 16 while their mother was being lowered from her tree den. (Special to The Times)

LIVING WITH BEARS

Bears are normally shy and not aggressive toward humans. If you encounter a bear while outdoors, remain calm and never run.

This avoids triggering the bear's chase instinct. Bears can run up to 35 mph.

Back slowly away from the bear to the safety of a vehicle or home. Never approach a bear or bear cubs. If you come across cubs you suspect are abandoned, which is rarely the case, call a biologist with the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Department. Do not attempt to "rescue" them.

If a bear is in a tree in your yard, clear the area of people and pets and allow the bear to come down and leave on its own.

Source: Louisiana Black Bear Conservation Committee

If bear populations continue to grow, as the Louisiana Black Bear Conservation Committee hopes, encounters with humans may increase. The short answer on what to do is leave them alone, biologist say.

"Bears are normally shy and not aggressive towards humans," said Dave Telesco, a biologist with the committee. "In this situation, she was in a neighborhood and we wanted

her back anyway. In another circumstance, we would have just left her alone and waited for her to come down and leave the area on her own."

Relocating bears while their cubs are not very mobile is a common tactic used by biologists. The Black Bear Conservation Committee organizes the repatriation project that includes a coalition of several entities and has relocated 30 female bears and 69 cubs since 2001.

Relocated adult bears are collared with an electronic device and, along with the cubs, have a microchip underneath the skin that can identify them for life. Cubs are not collared because none could be made loose enough to allow for their rapid growth.

"If we move (a mother bear), she won't want to leave because the cubs can't move," Telesco said. "For the most part, that's what happens."

Only three other instances has a mother bear left her new home, Telesco said, and in those cases, the cubs were adopted by another bear.

"It's unusual that she left after sticking around for so long," he said.

Biologist can only speculate what might have caused D-16 to leave her cubs.

"It was turkey hunting season and she could have gotten spooked. Or someone might have seen the cubs and thought they were abandoned and picked them up," Davidson, who once held D-16's cubs, said. "We may never know why she left or what happened to her cubs. But if they were left, it's unlikely they survived."

D-16 likely won't be placed back on the list of candidates for relocation.

"We'll let her live out her life and produce where she lives," Davidson said. "But we'll continue to monitor her."

CONSERVATION EFFORTS

The Louisiana Black Bear Conservation Committee is a nonprofit that organizes the black bear repatriation project. The goal is to accelerate recovery of the threatened Louisiana black bear by reintroducing female bears and their cubs to an area that is unoccupied but historically known as a black bear habitat.

The project hopes to establish a population of bears in east central Louisiana, which would provide a connection between two existing subpopulations. Those two subpopulations are on and near Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge in north Louisiana and within the upper Atchafalaya Basin in the southern part of the state. Since the project began in 2001, 30 female bears and 69 cubs have been relocated. An estimated 600 bears live in the state.

The committee involves a coalition of many private and public entities, including but not limited to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Department, LSU, the University of Tennessee, Arkansas Wildlife and Fisheries and other private partners.

Source: Louisiana Black Bear Conservation Committee

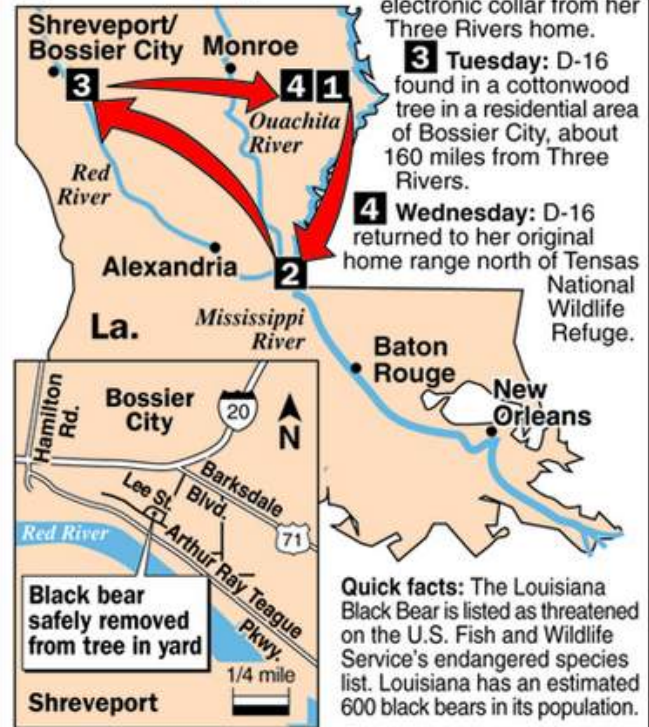
D-16's big adventure

1 March 16: D-16 and her two cubs are caught by biologists on private land north of Tensas National Wildlife Refuge. The three are relocated to Three Rivers Wildlife Management Area in Concordia Parish as part of the Louisiana Black Bear Conservation Committee's repatriation project.

2 March 22: Last signal heard by biologist from D-16's electronic collar from her Three Rivers home.

3 Tuesday: D-16 found in a cottonwood tree in a residential area of Bossier City, about 160 miles from Three Rivers.

4 Wednesday: D-16 returned to her original home range north of Tensas National Wildlife Refuge.



Sources: Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Black Bear Conservation Committee

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Paul Davidson, executive director of the Louisiana Black Bear Conservation Committee, secures D-16 for transport to Three Rivers Wildlife Management Area on March 16. (Special to The Times)